Large Heterogeneous Classes: Is Self-Paced Learning an Option?

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Despite all efforts by the authorities to promote English language teaching in Sri Lanka, "…a minority of the students achieves satisfactory examination results or the proficiency for satisfactory participation in employment that requires English." (Karunaratne, 2003; Raheemv&vRatwatte, 2001; cf. Liyanage, 2003, p. 139). One of the reasons for the failure of the majority of second language learners to achieve the required level of English proficiency may be attributed to the challenges of delivering second language instructions in an oversized, heterogeneous class.

In an endeavor to improve the teaching of English, the quasi-experimental study reported in this paper attempted to develop a self-instructional material-centred multimedia computer programme based on a dynamic usage-based approach to second language teaching and to assess the effect of instructions on the holistic development of English language proficiency of 216 first year undergraduates of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Holistic development was operationalized as the difference in the pre and post English proficiency tests consisting of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and writing.

The study involved three conditions: (1) A DUBc conditions in which the learnt in an individualized self-paced learning environment through the experimental self-instructional material-centred multimedia computer programme.(2) A DubBp condition in which the participants took a teacher-fronted PowerPoint based multimedia instructional programme also based on a dynamic usage-based perspective to second language teaching. (3) A tCLT condition in which the participants took the regular teacher-fronted English language programme based on the principles of the communicative language teaching approach.

The findings reveal that the DUBc participants performed significantly better than the participants in DUBp and tCLT conditions in general English proficiency measures. With regard to writing, the DUBc performed as well as the DUBp and tCLT participants who received guidance and feedback from a teacher.

The study concludes that a dynamic usage-based approach is as effective an approach as the traditional communicative language teaching approach in second language teaching/development and that the theoretically sound and empirically tested self-instructional material-centred multimedia computer programme can be effectively adopted in imparting of instructions on general English (receptive skills).

Key words: *Dynamic Usage-Based,Heterogeneous Classes, Second Language, Multimedia Instructions, Self-Paced Learning.*